

Che in Bolivia:

The "Revolution" That Failed

By Robert F. Lamberg

Ernesto Guevara comes from the country to the city/[with] a heart and a gun. . . .
—Bolivian guerrilla song.

[Our] isolation continues to be total . . . the peasant base is still undeveloped. . . . We still have not recruited any peasants, which is understandable considering the little contact we have had with them. . . .

—From Guevara's field diary,
April and August 1967.

It is ironic—but not untypical of Fidel Castro's checkered course—that only a few months after he stage-managed a major demonstration of his influence on the Latin American continent (the conference of the "Latin American Solidarity Organization" convened in Havana in August 1967), the strategy of guerrilla warfare by which he and his followers hoped to achieve their revolutionary

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aims was emphatically and decisively repudiated—in the much celebrated misadventure of "Che" Guevara in Bolivia.

There are several reasons why it is important to examine the Bolivian guerrilla movement. First and foremost, it was the only insurgent force organized entirely on the basis of refinements in guerrilla theory that might be described as the third phase of the Castroite ideology.¹ Secondly, it was the only guerrilla action in Latin America that yielded a great deal of firsthand documentary

¹ In the writer's view, it is possible to distinguish three distinct phases in the evolution of Castroite ideology. In the first, theoretical notions were formulated *ex post facto* to explain and glorify Castro's successful revolution in Cuba; the classic expression of these theories was Guevara's famous volume, *Guerra de Guerrillas*, published in Havana in 1960. In the second phase, Castroism was elaborated and infused with doctrinal concepts that placed it unmistakably in the ideological orbit of communism (see, for example, the "Second Declaration of Havana," *Revolucion* (Havana) Feb. 5, 1962; Guevara's "Guerra de Guerrillas: Un Metodo," *Cuba Socialista*, September 1962; and other sources). The third phase witnessed the amendment of Guevara's theories of guerrilla warfare to emphasize the need for armed struggle by guerrillas operating independently from political control (reflecting Havana's impatience with the peaceful politics and tactics of the pro-Soviet Communist parties on the continent). The chief articulator of this last phase of ideology was the Frenchman Jules Régis Debray. See in particular his *Revolution in the Revolution*, New York, The Monthly Review Press, 1967.

material, so that it can be analyzed with a minimum of speculation. In the third place, it provided a graphic and striking illustration of the distance between the revolutionary idealism of the Castroites and the practical realities of Latin American life.

In the latter respect, we shall start out by considering what Che Guevara apparently did not—the specific political, social and economic conditions that characterize the Bolivian nation.

A Society in Transition

Bolivia has been called "a beggar on a throne of gold"²—a reference to the unhappy fact that despite enormously rich natural resources the Bolivian economy is greatly underdeveloped and the country is plagued by poverty. Eighteen years ago these conditions helped to bring about a revolution which, in terms of the changes it wrought in Bolivia's political and economic system, ranks among the three most important revolutions in Latin America in this century (the other two being the Mexican in 1910 and the Cuban in 1959). Carried out by the *Movimiento Nacionalista Revolucionario* (hereafter MNR) under the leadership of Victor Paz Estenssoro, the revolution of 1952 was decidedly "socialistic" insofar as its original goals and programs were concerned. Among the significant measures that it undertook were the nationalization of the country's most important natural resource, the tin mines; an extensive program of land reform; and the introduction of universal suffrage. If, in later years, there was reason to doubt the success of these programs in terms of their economic impact, they did at least succeed in converting a significant segment of the population to the socio-political outlook they represented.³

In November 1964 the Paz regime was overthrown by a military faction within the ranks of the MNR, and a new government was formed under the leadership of Generals René Barrientos Ortuño and Alfredo Ovando Candia.⁴ The announced aim

of the new regime was to depoliticize public life and to institute decision-making based on technological expertise. In terms of power relations, the three most important forces in the country now became the military, the farmers and the mine workers.

For both political and economic reasons which do not need to be elaborated here, Barrientos and Candia concentrated their efforts on curtailing the power of the mine workers while seeking support from the major peasants' organizations. By 1966 the regime felt strong enough to seek popular affirmation of its leadership, and Barrientos was duly endorsed as President of Bolivia in national elections. Barrientos' success in establishing a power base in the peasants' organizations later proved to be an important political asset, as we shall see.

The Barrientos regime could hardly be called democratic (for that matter, neither could its predecessor). At the same time, it certainly was not "counterrevolutionary"—on the contrary, it aimed, in its own way and according to its own notions, at spurring the slow pace of progress toward the goals of the revolution. It might also be pointed out that Barrientos and his colleagues acted with relative restraint in dealing with their political opponents (at least compared to the behavior of some Latin American militarists who have seized power by force). It is true that the mine workers were subjected to a number of repressive measures, including the outlawing of their union organization and the exile of their most active leaders. But otherwise the regime seemed to act with deliberate moderation. The ousted leaders of the Paz regime were spared brutal physical persecution, and though Paz himself was exiled, his supporters were soon able to regroup and return to the political arena without serious harassment from the regime. Various leftist groups, including Communist factions, emerged as legal political organizations, and the pro-Soviet Communist Party of Bolivia (PCB) even took part—unsuccessfully—in the elections of 1966 by organizing the collective front FLN (*Frente de Liberación Nacional*). While it is impossible to gauge the genuineness of the support extended to Barrientos, it is at least clear that he was offered relatively weak opposition in the presidential election and emerged from it with enhanced strength and status.

To all appearances, Ernesto "Che" Guevara's plan to establish a guerrilla force in Bolivia originated some time in 1963, preceding the coup that brought Barrientos to power.⁵ It seems possible that

² Robert J. Alexander, *The Bolivian National Revolution*, New Brunswick, N.J., Rutgers University Press, 1958, p. 3.

³ On the 1952 revolution and its results, cf. Robert J. Alexander, *The Bolivian National Revolution*, New Brunswick, N.J., Rutgers University Press, 1958; and Mario Rolón Anaya,

Política y partidos en Bolivia, La Paz, Editorial Juventud, 1966.

⁴ On the Barrientos coup and its consequences, cf. William H. Brill, *Military Intervention in Bolivia: The Overthrow of Paz Estenssoro and the MNR*, Washington, D.C., Institute for the Comparative Study of Political Systems, 1967.

he later considered other target areas (during the period of his much-publicized disappearance from the public scene in 1965-66) but in the end decided Bolivia offered the ripest ground for revolution. In any case, the observer cannot escape the impression that once "el Che" had embarked upon his course, he paid very little attention to the important shifts taking place on the Bolivian scene—an oversight that was to contribute significantly to his downfall.

A Theory of Revolution

To understand Guevara's course of action, it is necessary to know something about the revolutionary theory on which it was based. First formulated by Guevara in his book *Guerra de Guerrillas*—and elaborated over the years in the statements and writings of Castro, Guevara, and finally the Frenchman Jules Régis Debray—this theory departed from the traditional Marxist and Leninist views of the conditions necessary for revolution to propound the notion that a guerrilla force could serve as the "nucleus of armed insurrection"—or *foco insurreccional*—creating a revolutionary situation by its own momentum. According to Guevara, a small band of armed revolutionaries, by gaining popular support, could grow in numbers and strength to the point where it could defeat a national army. On the Latin American continent, the best locale for such an armed struggle was the countryside, where the guerrillas would have more mobility against enemy forces and would be less liable to exposure than in densely populated areas. More important, Guevara believed that the peasants—motivated by the desire to possess their own land and to crush the feudal agricultural structure—would join with the guerrillas in fighting the "oppressors"; thus he assigned the peasantry a key role in the revolutionary warfare that he envisioned would "liberate" the Latin American continent.

Guevara's theory was said to be based in part on lessons the Castroites had learned in the Cuban revolution of 1958-59. Both he and Castro, and later Debray, came to assert that the Cuban experi-

ence exemplified the successful creation of a revolutionary situation by a guerrilla force. Consequently, they preached that the Cuban revolution must be extended—or, to employ the usual term, exported—to other Latin American countries. They also became convinced that revolutionary action—that is, armed struggle—was the only possible way to achieve social change in Latin America. Finally—in defiance of the sacrosanct Leninist notion of party supremacy—they insisted that in the course of such armed struggle, the political element of the revolutionary forces (*i.e.*, the Communist Party) should be subordinated to the military element (*i.e.*, the guerrillas).

These, in brief, were the convictions that underlay Guevara's venture into Bolivia. His broad aim was to achieve an "internationalization" of the guerrilla force in a region reaching from the Peruvian and Bolivian highlands into his homeland, Argentina, and possibly including even southwestern Brazil and Paraguay. The Bolivian area was intended to serve as the center of the insurgency, providing both a training and a proving ground for the guerrilla troops. The whole guerrilla region was to become a "second Vietnam," as Guevara later described it in a manifesto to his followers issued in April 1967.⁶

Guevara seems to have been indifferent to certain early signs that his ambitions might be overreaching. For example, a small guerrilla force organized in Argentina in 1963 by Jorge Massetti, working in close collaboration with Guevara, initially played a part in the insurgents' plans, but it was annihilated by government troops in 1964. The previous year had witnessed the crushing of a peasants' uprising in upper Peru (Cuzco) led by the Trotskyite Hugo Blanco Galdos⁷; an effort was made in 1965 to supplant this rebel movement with a guerrilla band

⁶ Ernesto Che Guevara, "Mensaje a la Tricontinental," in *Obra revolucionaria*, Mexico City, Ediciones ERA, SA 1967, pp. 640 ff. See also Castro's introduction to Guevara's diary, *loc. cit.*; Ricardo Rojo, *Che Guevara—Leben und Tod eines Freunden*, Frankfurt, S. Fisher Verlag, 1968, pp. 137 f., 176; Ted Cordova Clau, "Un Vietnam en Bolivie?" *Marcha* (Montevideo), May 19, 1967; and Richard Gott, "La experiencia guerrillera en Bolivia," *Estudios Internacionales* (Santiago), April-June 1968.

⁷ Blanco's peasant movement was crushed in May 1963; in any case, it is unlikely that Blanco and Guevara would have been able to collaborate, since both showed strong ideological and psychological tendencies to go it alone. According to Guevara's diary and other sources, Havana tried to establish a new guerrilla force in Peru in 1966-67, following the destruction of the first Castroite unit. See "Mensaje al Che No. 37," in *Punto Final* (Santiago), July 30, 1968; Agence France Presse (AFP), report from Camiri, Nov. 14, 1967; and the entries in Guevara's diary for March 20 and 21, 1967, *loc. cit.*

⁵ See Fidel Castro's introduction to *El Diario del Che en Bolivia*, Mexico City, Siglo XXI Editores, 1968. See also the report of a special OAS commission entitled *Estudio del "Diario del Che Guevara en Bolivia"*, Washington, D.C., Pan American Union, Mimeographed document, Sed. L/X.II.23, Dec. 20, 1968.

loyal to Castro, but it, too, was destroyed within a few months.

Seemingly undaunted by these developments, Guevara proceeded with his plans to establish the Bolivian base. As part of the advance preparations, Jose Maria Martinez Tamayo (referred to in rebel writings as "Ricardo"), a Cuban officer and later a member of the guerrilla force, reportedly made repeated trips to Bolivia between 1962 and 1966 to establish contacts, gather information, and make practical arrangements.⁸ According to Cuban sources, Tamara Bunke ("Tania")—an East German woman who figured prominently in the later drama of the jungles—was sent to Bolivia in 1964 with the assignment of establishing an urban network to help the guerrillas.⁹

Early in 1966—probably while he was in Havana for the Tricontinental Conference—Mario Monje Molina, the Secretary-General of the Communist Party of Bolivia, was finally informed of Guevara's plans. Though Monje was later to refuse to support the guerrilla venture—a crucial factor in the events of 1967, as we shall see—a certain number of prominent Bolivian Communists at first collaborated with the Cubans on preparations for the rural guerrilla base and for the supportive urban network which Tania was working to set up. Two Bolivians who actually joined the guerrilla force were the brothers Peredo Leigue—Roberto ("Coco") and Guido ("Inti")—the latter a member of the PCB Central Committee. Following a period of training and planning in Cuba with Guevara, the Peredos were assigned the task of establishing a site for the guerrilla base. Somewhere around the middle of 1966 they chose a ranch north of Lagunillas on the Nancahuazu River for the guerrillas' central training and supply camp. On November 7, Guevara arrived at the camp, masquerading as an Uruguayan businessman. At the end of that month the guerrilla force consisted of 13 men, mostly Cubans; according to plan, a number of other Cubans were to join the group, and at least 20 Bolivians were to be recruited in the initial phase of operations.¹⁰

Thus the guerrilla "*foco*" was formed which, according to the notions of Castro, Guevara and Debray, would provide the spark to set off the

powder keg of revolution on the Latin American continent. Guevara's diary reveals that the guerrillas were at first in constant touch with Havana and had no trouble receiving the financial and political assistance they needed to pursue their "internationalization" activities. The urban network also seemed to be functioning as planned. An Uruguayan journalist in Fidel Castro's confidence, writing in the spring of 1967, stressed that Guevara's force was operating independently and without responsibility to any "specific party" (meaning the Communist Party)—thus constituting a genuinely new form of guerrilla movement along Debray's theoretical lines.¹¹

The Problem of Isolation

Ironically, the revolutionaries' insistence that the guerrilla force be independent—which was intended, in part, to give flexibility to its political operations—had the opposite effect of contributing to its political isolation. On the last day of 1966, PCB Secretary General Monje arrived at the Nancahuazu camp to confer with Guevara on the question of collaboration between the party and the *foco*. The talks got nowhere. According to reports by both men, Monje maintained that preparatory discussions should be held with representatives of the PCB and other Communist parties on the continent before the start of guerrilla activity; more important, he asserted his right—as head of the Bolivian party—to exercise authority over the political and military operations of the *foco*. This, of course, was totally unacceptable to Guevara.¹² In a later report to the party issued after the destruction of the guerrillas (and after he was no longer head of the PCB), Monje stated that "there was no commitment made to Guevara either before or after December 31 to assist him in the guerrilla warfare which he planned to conduct. . . ."¹³

In subsequent months, the attitude of the Bolivian party leadership revealed the dilemma it confronted. On the one hand, it had no wish to ruffle feelings in Havana or to open itself to charges that it was abdicating its "revolutionary avant-gardist" role. On the other hand, it wanted to demonstrate

⁸ Jesus Lara, "Una renuncia remece al PC Boliviana," *Punto Final*, Feb. 25, 1969. See also *Verde Olivo* (Havana), Aug. 3, 1969.

⁹ *Bohemia* (Havana), Jan. 17, 1969.

¹⁰ See Guevara's entries in his diary for Nov. 27, 1966, and his monthly summary for November. See also Gott, *op. cit.*; and *International Herald Tribune* (Paris), July 2, 1968.

¹¹ Carlos Maria Gutierrez, "Bolivia: otra forma de guerrilla," *Marcha*, May 12, 1967.

¹² Cf. entry in Guevara's diary for Dec. 31, 1966; and Mario Monje, "Las divergencias del PC boliviano con Che Guevara," *Punto Final*, Feb. 27, 1968.

¹³ Monje, *ibid.*

its fealty to the Moscow line—which prescribed a legal road to power for the Communist parties of Latin America—and it obviously resented the encroachment of the guerrilla force on its own political preserve; moreover, as a local force with pragmatic leanings, it sensed the suicidal character of Guevara's action. As a consequence, its course appeared ambivalent. In February 1967 Bolivian party leaders went to Havana to negotiate directly with Fidel Castro, but the discussions came to nothing.¹⁴ After Guevara's force was discovered in March and came under attack by Bolivian government troops, the PCB professed its "solidarity" with the guerrillas.¹⁵ Not long afterward Jorge Kolle Cueto, Monje's successor as Secretary-General of the party, remarked ambiguously to newsmen that there were "not only [sic] members of our community" in the guerrilla force.¹⁶ During the Latin American Solidarity Conference, which took place in July-August 1967 in Havana, Castro was apparently furious with the Bolivian Communist delegation because of the party's continued refusal to collaborate with the guerrillas.¹⁷

¹⁴ Entry in Guevara's diary for Feb. 14, 1967; OAS report, *Estudio . . .*, p. 17; Lara, *loc. cit.*

¹⁵ Cf., for example, a PCB declaration published in the Uruguayan Communist paper, *El Popular* (Montevideo), dated April 29, 1967, signed by three high-ranking party officials, including Monje himself.

¹⁶ *El Popular*, May 19, 1967.

¹⁷ See Havana's message to Guevara of Aug. 26, 1967, published in *Punto Final*, July 30, 1968. In this message Castro used the scathing term "mierda" to refer to the PCB delegation to the Solidarity Conference.

The few Bolivian Communists who joined Guevara clearly did so against the wishes of the party leadership, at least in the period after December 1966. According to observers with seemingly reliable information, the *guerrilleros* recruited from the Bolivian Communist Party as well as from other political groups were "marginal types, unconnected with the core of their organizations."¹⁸ Most of the guerrillas of Bolivian nationality (numbering 29 in all¹⁹) were recruited from among unemployed mine workers by a pro-Chinese Communist mine workers' leader, Moisés Guevara Rodriguez; another group was made up of acquaintances of "Coco" Peredos who, like him, had been taxi drivers; and there were also some students among the recruits. The reliability of the Bolivian combatants does not appear to have been high, since one-third of them deserted and/or collaborated with the authorities after being taken prisoner. In later interviews, Debray felt impelled to refer to this element as *Lumpen-proletarians*.²⁰

The alienation of the Bolivian CP was only one of the factors leading to the isolation of the guerrilla force. Two other important factors were the nature of the territory which the guerrillas chose as their zone of operations and their inability to attract the support of the local population.

¹⁸ *International Herald Tribune*, Oct. 16, 1967.

¹⁹ *Estudio . . .*, pp. 49 ff.

²⁰ *The Times* (London), Oct. 28, 1967; Debray estimated the number of deserters at 15 to 17, but this seems exaggerated. Cf. *Estudio . . .*, p. 51, f.

Captured photo of Guevara's guerrilla band relaxing after a march in the spring of 1967. From left to right: Alejandro (Ricardo Gustavo Machin), Inti (Guido Paredes Leigue), Pombo (Harry Villegas), Acana Campero, "Che" Guevara, Tuma (Guevara's double—name unknown), Camba (Orlando Jimenez) and Joaquin (Juan V. Acuna Nunez). Reprinted with permission from Jay Mallin, "Che" Guevara on Revolution, Coral Gables, Fla., University of Miami Press, 1969.



To describe the area of operations briefly, Guevara and his lieutenants chose a zone in the southeast section of Bolivia comprising a part of the two *departamentos* (or provinces) of Santa Cruz and Chuquisaca. On the eastern boundary of the area was a railroad line running from Santa Cruz into Argentina, while to the south it bordered on the rapidly developing oil production center of Camiri. Despite its proximity to the latter, most of the region was thinly populated and inaccessible, containing both tropical jungles and arid mountain areas. Once the fighting started, the terrain worked against the guerrillas, since they were cut off from contact with the outside world and were therefore unable to get supplies and maintain communications.

In terms of socio-political factors, the area was also a poor choice for the *foco*. For a variety of reasons, the *campesinos*—or peasants—in the area proved entirely unwilling to cooperate with the *guerrilleros*. In part their attitude was a reflection of their way of life. The sparse peasant population was clustered in a few settlements throughout the area and lived mainly by extensive farming. Though the quality of the land imposed a marginal existence, the peasants were not dissatisfied with their lot. One important reason was that they owned their own farms (under a regional land reform dating back to 1878). Moreover, the nearby oil industry at Camiri had been able to absorb those unable to make a living from the soil. Thus, in contrast to the mining districts in northwestern Bolivia, the Southeast had not experienced explosive social problems.²¹

Added to this, the Barrientos regime, as noted earlier, had gone out of its way to court peasant support, and Barrientos himself was well-liked by the farmers; thus, when the skirmishing began, the *campesinos* looked upon the government troops as their own and sided against the guerrillas.²² A related factor in the peasants' outlook was their strong nationalistic sentiment and dislike of foreigners—and the farmers considered not only the Cubans and Peruvians but even the mine workers from northwest Bolivia as foreigners. Finally, a whole world of experience divided the *campesino* struggling with his workday cares from the ideologically-oriented *guerrillero* who, if he did not come

from the middle or upper class himself, was at least led by men of middle or upper-class origins.

The Phases of Fighting

It may now be useful to review in detail the events that marked the ill-starred course of Guevara's venture. In retrospect it is possible to group the operations of the guerrillas into four phases.²³

The first phase, from November 1966 to March 1967, witnessed the organization of the base at Nancahuazu. During this phase the *foco* grew in number to about 50 men, including—at one point on record—17 Cubans (of whom four were members of the Central Committee of the Cuban Communist Party), 29 Bolivians, and three Peruvians.²⁴ This phase ended abruptly on March 23, when—through a combination of carelessness and treachery—the location of the guerrilla force was revealed to Bolivian government troops and the first fighting took place. The initial skirmish actually took the government forces by surprise and cost them seven casualties; but the victory was a Pyrrhic one for the guerrillas, since the discovery of their whereabouts forced them to abandon their efforts to build up a guerrilla network and to concentrate all their energies on the immediate struggle. The outbreak of fighting was partly due to the bungling of the Cuban subcommander "Marcos" (Antonio Sánchez Díaz), whose lack of precautions precipitated the guerrillas' first contact with the enemy. But two other developments were also crucial: first, three Bolivian *guerrilleros* who deserted and were captured between March 11 and 19 furnished government troops with detailed information about the *foco*, its Cuban leaders, and the Nancahuazu camp; secondly, the government forces uncovered a jeep in the jungle in which compromising documents had been left, through what appeared to be the gross negligence of Tamara Bunke.²⁵

²¹ Cf. René Zavaleta Mercado, "Bolivia y América Latina," *Marcha*, May 30, 1969.

²² On the latter point all observers seem to agree; even Guevara's diary offers confirmation, at least indirectly.

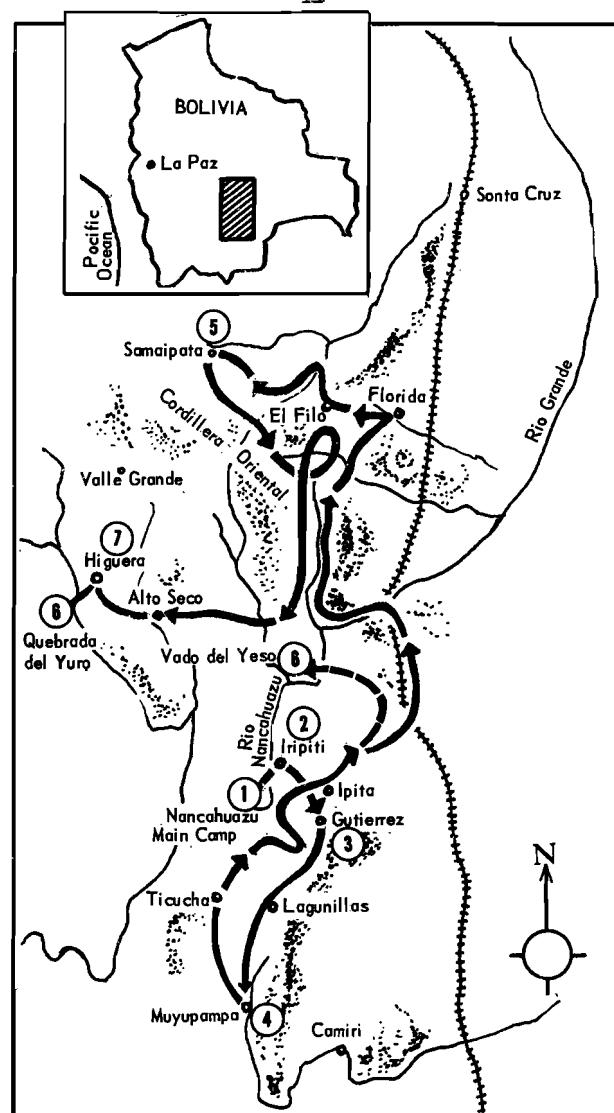
²³ The account that follows is based mainly on Guevara's diary entries and on information in *Estudio . . . , loc. cit.* Cf. also Gott, *op. cit.*

²⁴ *Estudio . . . , pp. 49 ff.* The guerrillas' urban network consisted of 15 persons at the most.

²⁵ Whether Tania was guilty of "negligence" or betrayal later became an issue. Months after Guevara's defeat, it was alleged that Tania had been an agent of the East German State Security Service (SSD) since 1961 and had been charged with shadowing Guevara and reporting on his activities: see the statement of Günther Männel, a former SSD officer, about Tamara Bunke in *Welt am Sonntag* (Hamburg), May 26, 1968. See also the *International Herald Tribune*, July 16, 1968; and *Bohemia*, Jan. 17, 1969.

At the time of the first encounter, "Tania" was one of four key collaborators who were visiting the guerrilla camp; the others were Debray, the Argentinian artist Ciro Roberto Bustos, and a Peruvian named Juan Pablo Chang Navarro Levano ("Chino"). As a consequence of the premature hostilities, all four were forced to stay with the guerrillas—two until they were captured (Debray and Bustos) and two until they lost their lives (Tania and Chino).²⁶ Thus they were unable to complete contact work which they had been assigned or which Guevara had in mind for them. Debray, for example, was to have gone on important missions to Havana and France, Bustos to Argentina, and Chang Navarro to Peru; Tania was unable to return to La Paz, where she had been the main link with the urban guerrilla unit and where she had also held an important cover job in the Information Bureau of the government. The entrapment of these four thus contributed critically to the isolation of the guerrillas. Debray and Bustos later made an effort to escape past enemy lines, but they were taken prisoner on April 19.

The second phase of guerrilla activities lasted from March 23 until the beginning of July. In this period the guerrilla force—which now called itself the *Ejército de Liberación Nacional* (ELN)—was constantly on the move, and in fact split into two groups around the middle of April so as to gain greater mobility. The main contingent commanded by Guevara numbered 25 men; the second group led by the Cuban "Joaquin" (Juan Vitalio Acuña Nuñez) consisted of 17 men. Neither detachment included a single *campesino*, and by this time it must have been clear to Guevara that he would not be able to recruit any more followers. The split-up of the guerrillas was only supposed to last a few days, but the two groups were fated never to meet again. In subsequent weeks both groups undertook a forced march to the north; Guevara's party, after capturing the village of Samaipata, reached the northernmost point of its drive on July 6. In these several months the guerrillas engaged in many minor skirmishes with the enemy, but only one was of any significance—an action near Iripiti on April 10, in which the government lost 11 officers and men. The guerrillas' resistance was severely taxed, however, by the combined impact of miserable conditions, sickness, accidents, declining



"Che" Guevara's theater of operations in the Bolivian departments of Santa Cruz and Chuquisaca: (1) First battle near the base camp on the Nancahuazu River, March 23, 1967; (2) battle at Iripiti, April 10; (3) skirmish at Gutierrez, April 19; (4) capture of Debray and Bustos at Muyupampa, April 20; (5) Guevara's victory at Samaipata, July 6; (6) destruction of "Joaquin's" group at Vado del Yeso, August 31 (exact whereabouts from April through August unknown; arrow indicates general area of operations of "Joaquin's" group); (7) fight at La Higuera, September 20; (8) capture of Guevara after battle of Quebrada del Yuro, October 8.

morale, internal dissensions, casualties, and—of course—isolation, described as "total" by Guevara as early as the end of April.

In the third phase of guerrilla operations, stretching from July to the third week in September, Guevara's group withdrew to the southwest as far as La Higuera, reaching there September 25. Meantime "Joaquin's" group had reached and

²⁶ See Guevara's diary entries for March 20 and 21, 1967, as well as his monthly summaries for March and April.

continued to operate in the northern part of the Nancahuazu district, but its strength was gradually reduced to 10 men. On August 31, this group was finally surrounded by government troops near Puerto Mauricio ("Vado del Yeso") and wiped out. Here, too, "Tania" was killed. Two weeks later the fragmentary urban network which she had established for Guevara was put out of commission by security detachments in La Paz.

By this time the army had been reinforced with newly-trained anti-guerrilla units (called "Rangers"), which stepped up efforts to surround and destroy the weary remainder of the guerrilla band. A fight near La Higuera of September 26 reduced Guevara's contingent to 16 men.

The fourth phase of developments marked the death gasps of the "*foco*." The final fighting took place between September 26 and October 8; on the latter date, in an action near Quebrada del Yuro, the guerrilla unit lost seven combatants—among them Guevara himself. According to widely published reports, Guevara was shot the day after he was taken prisoner. The rest of the now leaderless *guerrilleros* fled, with the "Rangers" in pursuit; over the next couple of months, some were captured and some surrendered voluntarily, while a few managed to make good their escape. Three Cubans eventually got back to their homeland via Chile. Two Bolivians, Guido Peredo ("Inti") and David Adriaola ("Dario") remained in Bolivia, working underground in a vain attempt to revive the guerrilla movement; "Inti" was finally killed in September 1969 in La Paz, where he was trying to organize a new urban revolutionary unit.²⁷ By that time the guerrilla episode was past history to most Bolivians.

The Phenomenon of Publicity

Writing in 1968, a British observer seemed to state the obvious when he remarked that Guevara's small band of insurgents had attracted attention way out of proportion to its effective power, not only on the national level (as reflected in the reaction of the government, press, and people of

Bolivia) but around the world.²⁸ In retrospect it seems amazing that so much exaggerated information pertaining to the strength and effectiveness of the guerrilla force managed to find its way into print. To cite a few examples from scattered sources, it was reported during the spring of 1967 that the *foco* consisted of at least 400 revolutionaries, that this force was being trained by guerrilla veterans from Venezuela, that it had a medical staff, and that it was broadcasting news over a powerful short-wave radio.²⁹ A French student of guerrilla warfare declared: "The new guerrilla focus seems to constitute the most serious revolutionary initiative in Latin America in the last ten years."³⁰

Much of the "news" about the guerrillas issued from sympathetic sources—that is, from Havana and from Castroite supporters, who naturally wished to enhance the importance of Guevara's continental venture; in this effort they simply substituted imagination for information, since in the whole period of fighting Guevara only managed to smuggle out five communiqués.³¹ But exaggerated stories were also circulated by other sources—for example, the Bolivian military and government authorities, who may have wished to spur more assistance from the United States. Obviously another reason for the enormous publicity that surrounded the venture was the fact that Guevara—already a legendary hero to revolutionaries around the globe—assumed personal leadership of the *foco*. By the same token, the role of Jules Debray—the ideologist of the so-called "third phase of Castroism"—as Castro's emissary to the guerrilla camp attracted international attention after his capture. The campaign for the release of the then 27-year-old revolutionary got press coverage on a scale that is not often equalled: everyone got into the act, from Debray's conservative and wealthy Parisian mother (who called him "one of France's most brilliant intellectuals" and a "spiritually deeply Christian apostle"), to *The New York Times'* C. L. Sulzberger (who called him "an egocentric hippie"), to Jean Paul

²⁸ Gott, *op. cit.* Gott himself estimated the number of guerrillas at 150—three times the actual strength later revealed by Guevara's diary.

²⁹ See, e.g., *The New York Times* (Paris edition), April 4, 1967; Associated Press (AP) report from La Paz, April 4, 1967; and AFP and AP reports from La Paz, March 29, 1967.

³⁰ Marcel Niedergang in *Le Monde* (Paris), May 18, 1967.

³¹ E.g., see *Boletin Tricontinental* (Havana), July 1967; and Ojarikuj Runa, "Bolivia—analisis de una situacion," *Pensamiento Critico* (Havana), July 1967. Guevara's communiqués were later printed in *Granma*, No. 28, 1968, and *Punto Final*, July 30, 1968.

²⁷ The only known activity of the new ELN commander "Inti" was to issue unrealistic manifestos and communiqués that were distributed by Havana to Latin America's left radical press. E.g., see *Punto Final*, Feb. 27, July 30, and Aug. 27, 1968. On "Inti's" death, see AFP and Reuter's reports from La Paz, Sept. 10, 1969; also *Granma* (Havana), Sept. 12, 1969.

Sartre, Charles de Gaulle, the Vatican, and indirectly Lyndon B. Johnson.³² All of this publicity cast a glow on the handful of *guerrilleros* in the jungles of Nancahuazu.

Reactions of the Regime

While the attention focused on Bolivia may have had some influence on the Barrientos regime, the course it pursued during the period of the guerrilla challenge was dictated in the main by domestic political considerations. To all appearances, when Guevara's force was first discovered, the regime assumed that it had been organized by leftist opposition factions in Bolivia.³³ In terms of numerical strength, the most important of these opposition elements were the aforementioned MNR (*Movimiento Nacionalista Revolucionario*) and the PRIN (*Partido Revolucionario de Izquierda Nacionalista*), a party led by the exiled mine workers' leader, Juan Lechin Oquendo. These parties, *inter alia*, shared influence with Trotskyite groups and the pro-Soviet and pro-Chinese Communists in the mine workers' organizations.

After the first brush with the guerrillas in March, Barrientos took steps to curtail the activity of the MNR, the PRIN, and the Communists, as well as the Trotskyites in the divided *Partido Obrero Revolucionario* (POR). Following the fight at Iripiti in April, the regime declared a state of emergency which made southeast Bolivia a military zone and outlawed all Communist and Trotskyite organizations.³⁴ Although the government subsequently relaxed its crackdown, continued restraints on political activity led to restiveness among the miners. In late June Barrientos apparently felt it necessary to order the military occupation of three mining districts (Huanuni, Siglo Veinte and Catavi), leading to an open clash between government soldiers and armed mine workers that reportedly took 21 lives and sparked unrest among university students in the capital.³⁵

By this time, however, it had long since become clear to the authorities and to everyone else that no

political forces in Bolivia were actively supporting the guerrilla movement. While propaganda friendly to the *foco* had been distributed in the mining areas, the regime made no charges of collaboration against the rebellious mine workers. Thus Barrientos was probably less concerned about the guerrillas than he was about reinforcing his political position when he made his next move: at the end of June he convened a congress of *campesinos*, who made it clear that the loyalties of the agricultural Southeast belonged to the President; they also adopted a declaration labeling the guerrillas an "anti-national" force and promising assistance to the army in its task of pacification.³⁶

The convocation of the "National Congress of Peasant Workers of Bolivia" was the last extraordinary political measure taken by the regime in connection with the *guerrilleros*, even though they continued to be active for at least another three months. At no time did the guerrilla campaign seriously threaten the political power of the regime, again due to the fact that the guerrillas failed to establish links with any force of political significance in the country.

Reactions of the Opposition

In the latter respect, there is a good deal in the public record to indicate either ignorance of, or indifference to, the guerrilla movement on the part of precisely those groups who might have been expected to be Guevara's natural collaborators. To the extent that verbal support was expressed at all, it dwindled or was withdrawn as it became clear that the guerrilla mission was doomed to failure. The reaction of the pro-Soviet Communist Party of Bolivia—the one force which Guevara seriously sought and failed to enlist as an ally—has already been described in detail. In the case of the MNR—a party long since weakened by dissension and more tolerated than respected in Barrientos' Bolivia—it seems clear from the statements of various leaders that none of them had any information about the character of the guerrilla operation. For example, after the existence of the *foco* became public knowledge, the exiled MNR chief, Victor Paz Estenssoro, issued statements call-

³² E.g., see reports of AFP and the Italian news agency ANSA from La Paz, May 6, 1967; and the *International Herald Tribune* (Paris), Oct. 4, 1967.

³³ E.g., see United Press International (UPI) report from La Paz, March 31, 1967.

³⁴ AFP report from La Paz, April 12, 1967.

³⁵ Cf. Ruben Vasquez Diaz, *La Bolivie à l'heure du Che*, Paris, Francois Maspero, 1968, especially Chapter I.

³⁶ Discussed, *inter alia*, in Edgar Millares Reyes, *Las Guerrillas: Teoria y Practica*, Sucre, Bolivia, Imprenta Universitaria, 1968, p. 40.

ing it "an integral Bolivian phenomenon" and "the result of an internal process" (sic!); initially he expressed "sympathy" for the guerrillas but later prudently advised his followers against taking any part in the movement.³⁷ Another MNR leader, René Zavaleta Mercado, spoke vaguely of the need for "armed struggle" but did not encourage support for Guevara in specific terms.³⁸ By September 1967 Raúl Lema Peláez, an MNR senator in La Paz, was ready to declare that the MNR had "no connection with the guerrilla movement whatsoever."³⁹

As for the PRIN group, Guevara's diary revealed that its aforementioned leader, Juan Lechin Oquendo, promised Castro in Havana early in 1967 that he would publish a declaration of his party's support for the guerrilla operation, and he fulfilled this promise in a manifesto issued about the first of May.⁴⁰ That, however, was the last heard from PRIN until October, when the party withdrew its "endorsement" of the now-defeated forces whom it had hailed six months earlier as the "liberators of the homeland."⁴¹

The Trotskyites of the POR (Guillermo Lora's group) expressed "solidarity" with the guerrilla force in a Central Committee resolution of April 1967, but that was all. Another Trotskyite group, the *POR—Cuarta Internacional* was even more circumspect in its endorsement.⁴²

According to all available evidence, none of these groups ever gave active assistance to the guerrillas. The same was apparently true of the pro-Chinese Bolivian Communist Party, though some confusion surrounded its role. For reasons that were not clear, Castro showed special enmity toward the pro-Chinese Bolivians after the destruction of the guerrilla force, accusing them of treason—even though one of their followers, Moisés Guevara Rodríguez, had been among the most dedicated members of the *foco* and had indeed given his life for it.⁴³

The remaining parties and factions in Bolivia, among them the relatively important *Falange Socialista Boliviana*, were opposed to the guerrillas from the start, as they made clear in their public statements and commentaries.⁴⁴

Insofar as active support from outside the country was concerned, once the fighting began, the guerrillas were effectively cut off from all but a trickle of help from Havana. By contrast, Barrientos was able to count on assistance from the United States which, while modest in absolute terms, was substantial in proportion to the small size and strength of Guevara's force. The main US contribution was to conduct an anti-guerrilla training course for several hundred Bolivian soldiers, providing the "Ranger" units which were instrumental in the final defeat of the guerrillas.⁴⁵ In the opinion of military observers, by the fall of 1967 the combat effectiveness of the Bolivian troops was sufficient for them to have put down a much stronger guerrilla force than that led by Guevara.

The Causes of Failure

In the course of this paper, a number of the factors that contributed to the failure of Guevara's guerrillas have been suggested. To discuss these factors systematically, it may be useful to classify them in three categories, ranging from the least to the most significant.⁴⁶

The first category covers errors, insufficiencies, or inadvertent developments of a technical or military nature. Certain factors—for example, losses due to illness—were of course beyond anyone's ability to control. But manifold errors were also made—among them, the poor political judgment used in the selection of some of the *guerrilleros*, accounting in part for later desertions and be-

³⁷ See *El Popular*, May 16, 1967; *El Diario* (La Paz), June 16, 1967; Interpress Service (Lima), Aug. 2, 1967; Vasquez, *op. cit.*, pp. 118 ff.; and finally an interview with Paz in *Ultimas Noticias* (Caracas), Aug. 5, 1967.

³⁸ Vasquez, *ibid.*, pp. 111 ff.

³⁹ Millares, *op. cit.*, p. 140.

⁴⁰ See Guevara's diary entry for April 15, 1967, and AFP report from La Paz, May 2, 1967; see also *International Herald Tribune*, July 2, 1968.

⁴¹ *Presencia* (La Paz), Oct. 31, 1967, as cited in Millares, *op. cit.*, p. 126.

⁴² Millares, *ibid.*, pp. 115 f., 119 f.; Vasquez, *op. cit.*, p. 116.

⁴³ Cf. Castro's introduction to Guevara's diary, *loc. cit.*, as well as the pro-Chinese Communists' pronouncement, *Oscar Zamora responde a Fidel Castro*, Montevideo, Ediciones del MIR, 1968.

⁴⁴ Pertinent references may be found in Millares, *op. cit.*

⁴⁵ Juan de Onis placed the number of Bolivian soldiers trained by US Army personnel at 400: *International Herald Tribune*, July 2, 1968. Another observer, Jay Mallin, estimated the number at a few hundred more: "Che Guevara: Some Documentary Puzzles at the End of a Long Journey," *Journal of Inter-American Studies* (Coral Cables, Fla.), Vol. X, No. 1. See also UPI report from Washington, D.C., March 10, 1968.

⁴⁶ The text that follows incorporates some conclusions drawn, *inter alia*, by Gott, *op. cit.*; Debray, the *Times* (London), Oct. 28, 1967; Jacques Arnault, *L'Humanité* (Paris), Nov. 17, 1967; Juan de Onis, *loc. cit.*; and Antonio Arguedas Mendieta, *El Siglo* (Santiago), July 25, 1968. However these sources generally limit themselves to the technical and tactical aspects of Guevara's failure—in other words, to the first two of the author's three categories.

trayals; their insufficient military training, which lessened the striking power of the *foto*; their mania to immortalize themselves in vast quantities of photographs, written documents, and even portrait sketches, which—once captured—were of great help to the government troops; and their initial casual methods of maintaining outside contacts (notably with Havana), stocking supplies, etc. All of these errors shed significant light on the military capacities of Guevara and his lieutenants, but they are of only marginal importance in explaining the failure of the guerrilla venture.

The second category consists of more serious inadequacies and errors that can be described as tactical in nature. Two crucial weaknesses of the guerrilla organization were the fragility of its urban network, operated by largely inexperienced personnel, and its virtual lack of security machinery. (In the latter connection, Debray expressed the suspicion that enemy agents had infiltrated the *foto*—without, however, naming names; for information pointing to “Tania” as a likely suspect, see footnote 25.) As for outright errors, first and foremost was the selection of the guerrilla zone—though this was also a matter of faulty strategic conception, as we shall see. Beyond the choice itself, the guerrillas showed negligence in failing to obtain sufficient information about the topography and other natural aspects of the zone of operations. A lack of proper precautions was responsible for a number of other tactical errors, including the premature discovery of the guerrilla base camp and the subsequent loss of supply depots. Taken together, these tactical weaknesses and mistakes would of themselves have been enough to doom the guerrilla adventure, and some observers—particularly those with Castroite sympathies—have tried to argue that they provide, along with the first category of problems, the most meaningful explanation for Guevara’s failure.

However, there is another and by far more crucial category of reasons why the mission failed, and these have to do with the fact that the whole concept of the *foto* was based on fallacious strategic doctrines, principles and interpretations. The available evidence seems to indicate that not a single one of the Castroites responsible for launching the guerrilla movement made an objective study in advance of the Bolivian nation, the causes and consequences of its revolution of 1952, or the character of the regime elevated to power by the *coup d'état* of 1964. This alone could explain why the *guerrilleros* were so surprised by their isolation

once they were encamped in the country. To the extent that they considered Bolivian factors at all, they misjudged the attitude of the *campesinos*, the strength of the Barrientos government, and the relative popularity of the Bolivian army, which had been overhauled after the 1952 revolution and which enjoyed respect, partly because it had participated for years in economic development projects.

The theorists of guerrilla warfare also ignored the existence of virulent nationalism in Bolivia; by insisting on the organization of an “international” guerrilla movement, they left the field free for Barrientos to appeal to patriotic sentiment and even opened themselves to the charge of neocolonialism *sui generis*, since all the key positions in the *foto* were held by Cubans.

The Castroites’ stress on the priority of military over political struggle—and therefore on the need to subordinate political elements to the guerrilla force in any revolutionary situation—led them to forfeit the possibility of collaboration with the Bolivian Communists, whose assistance might not have been large in a concrete sense but would probably have been helpful for propaganda purposes. The same ideological rigidity led them to rule out from the start any possibility of compromise or cooperation with the other forces of the far Left which enjoyed some influence in Barrientos’ Bolivia; it was assumed (probably correctly) that such “ideologically foreign” political groups would be non-compliant to the will of the *foto*.

Thus, both through ignorance of the realities of the Bolivian situation and through ideological preconceptions, Guevara’s expedition was initiated according to a “grand plan” that relied exclusively on guerrilla warfare to achieve revolution. Ironically, “warfare” is what they got, and it soon revealed the *guerrilleros* for what they really were—a mere half-hundred armed foreigners and Bolivian “*marginados*,” gradually reduced to desperation by their isolated condition and waiting for a miracle that never came. In a sense “Castroism” in Bolivia was defeated by the Castroite strategy itself, meeting its end in a military mop-up action.

The Fundamental Fallacy

Going a step farther, in the final analysis the failure of the guerrilla movement in Bolivia—and in all Latin American countries—was the necessary consequence of a Cuban misreading of history. The ideologized reconstruction of Castro’s victory,

fashioned after the event in response to domestic political requirements and to Castroite aspirations in Latin America, opportunistically distorted the situation in Cuba during the years 1953-59.

In the first place, Castro's "*foco*" did *not* create a revolutionary situation where none had existed, as Castroite history would have it; the revolutionary situation existed in Cuba *before* the formation of the guerrilla movement. In the second place, Castroite ideologists have described Castro's guerrilla force as a "peasant army," implying that Fidel succeeded in mobilizing the Cuban peasantry in support of his cause; but in reality, the nucleus of Castro's force was drawn from a small group of middle-class revolutionaries. In the third place, the new history misrepresented the character of the Batista regime—at once dictatorial and weak—by equating it with those of Ydigoras Fuentes or Mendez Montenegro in Guatemala, of Romulo Betancourt or Raoul Leoni in Venezuela, of Lleras Restrepo in Colombia, of Belaunde Terry in Peru, and finally of René Barrientos in Bolivia. In so doing, it implied that all Latin American leaders were as vulnerable to revolutionary overthrow as Fulgencio Batista had been. In the fourth place, ridiculous parallels were drawn between the Cuban Sierra Maestra and the Bolivian Andes; between Cuban city youth on the one hand and upland *Indios* and Brazilian *caboclos* on the other. In the fifth place, no mention was made of the assistance that had been extended to Castro by populist parties in Latin America and also by liberal groups in the United States of America, because such assistance did not fit the postrevolutionary image of the *Lider maximo*. Finally, no recognition was given to the fact that Castro owed a good deal of his success in the 1950's to his purposeful ambiguity concerning his ideological convictions, accounting for the support he won from all Cuban democrats (but *not* the Communists); hence, misleading comparisons were made between Castro's course and that pursued by his followers in the 1960's, who loudly proclaimed their adherence to a "Cuban" type of Marxism-Leninism (much as the validity of that ideological compound might be challenged by other leftists), and who as a result were opposed by all political groups of any consequence *except* the Communists (and even the support furnished by the latter was hesitant, ineffective, ambivalent and intermittent, as we have seen).

Given these fallacies built into Castroite historiography and *a fortiori* into the Castroite model of revolution, it is no wonder that Havana failed in

its effort to export its revolution to the Latin American continent. Looking beyond Guevara's misadventure in Bolivia to guerrilla efforts in other Latin American countries, in no case has a guerrilla movement based on the Cuban model achieved enough strength to pose a serious threat to a ruling government regardless of whether the latter was a progressive regime or a dictatorship. In a few instances, other types of guerrilla forces have operated temporarily with somewhat more success, but none has escaped eventual extinction.

In Guatemala, for example, guerrilla forces have existed since the early 1960's. Those of Castroite persuasion have failed to shake the security of the government in any way; in fact, their acts of terrorism have been counterproductive in that they have contributed to public unrest and invited retaliation, giving aid and comfort to the extreme Right and impeding the economic and social modernization of the country. A Trotskyite guerrilla group which for years operated independently had some success in winning over the *campesinos* with its down-to-earth ideology; eventually, however, the Guatemalan army eliminated these revolutionaries as an effective force.

In Venezuela—which for a variety of economic, political and geographic reasons was long Castro's primary target on the continent—the guerrilla movement dwindled down to nothing after leadership conflicts led the Communist Party of Venezuela to sever relations with the guerrillas and government troops then decimated their ranks.

In Colombia, guerrilla activity has similarly died down. It is worth noting that armed insurgents were operating in Colombia long before Castro came to power—in fact, since the disastrous *violencia* that started in 1948. For several years, a guerrilla force led by the Colombian Communist Party managed to win the support of a portion of the peasantry in a few districts, but it disintegrated after the government succeeded in pacifying the countryside and the party changed its strategy to accord with the Moscow line of pursuing power by peaceful means. Several efforts were made to launch a Castroite guerrilla movement, the last in 1965; but the *foco* was unable to muster enough strength to become active, even though it attracted to its ranks a man of the stature of Father Camilo Torres.

In Peru, as noted earlier, armed peasant organizations operated with some success in the province of Cuzco in 1962-63, under the leadership of the Trotskyite Hugo Blanco. However, the Castroite guerrilla band organized in 1965 was destroyed

within a few months. A number of small Castroite "focos" were formed in other countries (several times, in fact, in Argentina and Brazil), but they fell apart so quickly that the world press hardly had occasion to note their existence.⁴⁷

The fiasco in Bolivia seems to have been the final straw that convinced Castro of the impracticality of his hopes for a "second Cuba." Today—some years since the orthodox Communists on the continent were assaulted by Havana for having abandoned guerrilla adventures—Castro himself is under attack by such adherents of the "foco" theory as

Douglas Bravo in Venezuela and Fabio Vasquez Castaño in Colombia. Both have accused Castro of "betrayal of the guerrilla," indicating that Cuba—presumably because of Soviet pressure as well as domestic economic problems—has now made it clear she can no longer give them assistance.

Castro's belated realism cannot reverse the mistakes of the past. Let us hope, however, that it has helped to dampen the fervor of those who have glorified guerrilla warfare as the only means to achieve social and economic justice, not seeing that all it has really ever accomplished was to encourage political polarization and extremism on the Right as well as on the Left in the Latin American nations. If the futility of the guerrilla strategy has indeed become recognized, then a small step forward has been taken at least toward the understanding—if not toward the solution—of the complex social, economic and political tensions that characterize Latin American life.

⁴⁷ A new type of "armed struggle" has sprung up in the last few years, particularly in Uruguay and Brazil, in the form of "urban" guerrilla units; however, they appear to be only indirectly tied to or motivated by Castroism. So far police efforts to curb their activity have had indifferent success; at the same time, it is impossible to imagine that they could achieve genuine revolutionary victories.

The Communist Parties of Latin America

By Robert J. Alexander

Somewhat like Caesar's Gaul, Latin American communism is divided, if not into three parts, into three kinds of parties: those which follow Moscow, those which are oriented toward Peking, and those which accept Havana's leadership.

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At present, orthodox Moscow-oriented Communist parties exist in twenty of the twenty-one Latin American republics, including Guyana, the former British colony which attained independence only last February. The sole exception is Cuba, whose present Fidelista Communist Party takes an ideological position of its own, independent of both Moscow and Peking.

Of the parties aligned with Moscow, several antedate even the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917. The Communist parties of Chile and Uruguay were originally organized as Socialist parties prior to